BUSINESS & CAREERS

How to backup your files now

We all buy insurance, maintain our homes and cars and generally safeguard things that matter. But the information on our computers? Surprising numbers of people don't create extra copies of the electronically stored information (ESI) they depend on. // Lawyers, like other business people, can ill afford to not back up their data. The continuity of their practices depends on it. // Consider these tips to get your firm's backups in shape.

HI-TECH

LUIGI BENETTON

Ditch tapes

Music and movie lovers have long abandoned cassettes, opting instead for optical discs or hard-disc-based devices. If only these same people would see the folly in continuing to back up business data using tapes.

"Tape wears," says John Pater, director of information technology for Davis LLP. "It's hard to ensure the integrity of the data on it, since it's more sensitive to dust, heat, magnetic forces, moisture and so forth."

And as technology evolves, machines and software that read backup tapes become scarcer. "Even if you have the hardware, the software likely won't run on the physical systems you have," says Chuck Rothman, director, e-discovery services for Wortzman Nickle Professional Corporation.

CDs aren't much better.

"Manufacturers say CDs will last from 50 to 100 years, but they haven't been around that long," Rothman notes. He offers this rough guideline: "If you want to keep data for a year or two, CDs are fine. If you want to keep it for ten years, don't use CDs."

Use hard disks

At his office, Toronto real estate lawyer David Feld runs a network-attached storage (NAS) device containing four mirrored one-terabyte drives to back up his firm's documents and Microsoft Exchange server. Pater's firm uses disk-to-disk backup run by EVault software.

Since the interface between hard disks and computers has not changed much in decades, both will likely be able to read today's backups years from now. Rothman tells of successfully reading a hard drive from the 1980s using an interface card he still had. "Hard disks are long-term high-capacity storage you don't have to apply power to," he says.

Keep data in few places

You can exhort staff to periodically back up their own documents, email and other business data. And you can herd cats. That doesn't mean you want to attempt either task.

Businesses of all sizes can cost-effectively set up their computing environments to keep information on a central data server. "That way, I don't have to worry about reaching out to laptops and desktops," Pater explains. "If it's all in one spot, it's easier to maintain data integrity and security, to back it up, to make it accessible."

Cull data you don't need to keep

We're digital pack rats largely because of the "storage is cheap, so why not keep it?" refrain.

But the less data you keep, the less you have to back up, (and the smaller the sea of data that you face during discovery activity).

"The main cost isn't hard disks, it's the maintenance," Rothman explains. "If you must back up one terabyte of data every day, that takes some effort."

Automate backup processes

"Human error is the biggest reason for data loss," Feld says, "so I use automatic backups that nobody need remember to run."

Create more than one backup

"When I handle e-discovery, I always create two backups, since backups can fail too," Rothman says.

Periodically test your backups

When it comes to data backup, many people just set it and forget it. They also forget that there are only two types of hard disks in the world: those that have failed and those that will.

Since even the most redundant setups, which can include mirrored servers and tape backups, have been known to fail, make time to check your backups regularly.

Be ready to field client questions

Techno-savvy clients abound, and they expect outside counsel to protect their data as well as they themselves do.

"In December, I had to complete a client form about data backup, security, business continuity — they wanted to know that the people they do business with handle their data as well as they do," says Pater.

"Clients are more sophisticated than law firms, though firms are catching up," Rothman adds, noting that financial industry clients may require firms to perform independent audits to check law firm data security.

Online backups — the pros

Feld enthuses about his online backup tools, Polypro and DropBox. MozyPro backs up the firm's systems to the cloud every night, while DropBox backs up in real time and enables him to "synchronize" the firm's files on other computers.

"Don't only do on-site backups," Feld urges. "We go home at night knowing that if our office burns down, we are good to go the next day."

Online backups — the cons

Pater and Rothman don't share Feld's enthusiasm.

"It's still fairly expensive if you stay within Canadian borders," Pater says. "It's a little cheaper outside Canada, but if servers are on US soil, the [USA] Patriot Act comes into play."

Rothman acknowledges other people's Patriot Act worries even if he doesn't share them. His concern? Providers may store data from several customers on the same servers. "Their backup media contain backups of an entire server, not a separate backup of each client's material," he explains. "This means the provider's backup policies might not mesh with your backup policies."

Online backups — SLA clauses to look for

Online backup service providers explain how they serve clients using service level agreements. Read them to learn things like what happens to your data if the vendor goes out of business and how much time it takes to get your data restored.

Less expensive options

Are you a cash-strapped solo just starting out? For the time being, buy an external hard drive, connect it to your computer and activate Time Machine on a Mac or Windows Backup on a Windows computer.

Another handy utility, Windows Briefcase can create incremental backups of important folders on USB memory sticks or external drives.

And as soon as you can, budget for business-grade backup systems.